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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 002295

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SUBJECT: CANADIAN OPPOSITION LEADER OPPOSES EXTENSION OF  
COMBAT TROOPS IN KANDAHAR

REF: OTTAWA 2135

Classified By: Ambassador David H. Wilkins. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (c).

¶1. (C) Summary: Opposition leader Stephane Dion ruled out Liberal Party support for the extension of Canadian combat troops in Kandahar during a discussion of Afghanistan with Ambassador Wilkins, the British High Commissioner, and RC-South country diplomats on December 18. Dion criticized the government for its call to extend the Canadian Forces' mission in Afghanistan by two years to February 2011, its decision to make that country Canada's largest aid recipient, and for being "dishonest" when it drafted the Manley Panel's terms of reference (reftel). The opposition leader indicated a disappointing willingness to live with the possibility of Afghanistan "going under" and the attendant damage to NATO and its credibility. Even in the face of Dion's weak and unpopular leadership, the Conservatives will have to maneuver carefully to get sufficient Parliamentary support for an extension of the combat mission in Kandahar. Any good news they can share about additional burden-sharing within NATO and enhanced materiel capabilities could strengthen their prospects considerably. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Wilkins and several of his Ottawa-based counterparts from countries in ISAF Regional Command - South (RC-S) discussed Afghanistan with opposition Liberal Party leader Stephane Dion at a December 18 breakfast at the invitation of the British High Commissioner. The High Commissioner had billed the event as an informal setting where diplomats from RC-S countries could make Dion aware of the wider foreign policy implications of Canada's role in Afghanistan. The senior diplomats urged Dion to support the extension of Canada's combat role in RC-S beyond February ¶2009. After expressing great appreciation for Canada's "heavy lifting" in Kandahar, Ambassador Wilkins reviewed U.S. policy towards Afghanistan, stressed that artificial timelines were harmful and played into the hands of the Taliban, and urged Dion to give full and fair consideration to the recommendations in the forthcoming "Manley Panel" report.

¶3. (C) Dion responded with criticism of Conservative Prime Minister Harper's handling of the war effort to date, complaining that the government had not been "candid" with Canadians and the opposition parties. The lack of candor, he said, extended to the formulation of the Manley Panel's terms

of reference (TOR). None of the four options outlined in the TOR contained a plain language call for combat troops to remain in RC-S, even though the Conservative government was "committed" to extending the combat mission, he claimed.

14. (C) The Liberal leader also criticized the government for refusing to permit "real debate" in Parliament, and argued that the overwhelming majority of Canadian foreign assistance was wrongly going to Afghanistan rather than other countries such as Lebanon that, he said, "had more ties to Canada." Dion also expressed frustration at the government's alleged unwillingness to organize his travel to Afghanistan to see things for himself. (Note: In a follow-up call, Department of National Defence (DND) officials said that they had made arrangements for Dion to travel to Afghanistan on January 9. End note.)

15. (C) Near the end of Dion's remarks, the Ambassador observed that it seemed Dion had not yet made up his mind about the way ahead in Afghanistan, and would, perhaps, wait for the Manley Panel's report and recommendations before doing so. Dion demurred, saying that while Canada had committed troops to the mission until February 2009 the combat mission should not be extended. The Liberals might agree to some kind of training role for Canadian Forces (CF) elsewhere in Afghanistan, he said, but they would not support a combat role for the CF in Kandahar, or training that occurs in combat situations. "Training is not combat," Dion said, explaining that, for the Liberals, this is not just a question of semantics.

16. (C) Ambassador Wilkins asked Dion what he thought would happen to Afghanistan if Canada withdrew the CF and other

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allies followed Canada's example and left. Dion shrugged his shoulders, acknowledged that Afghanistan would likely "go under" and remarked that NATO would be "severely damaged." Dion then expressed great pessimism about the overall mission in Afghanistan.

Comment  
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17. (C) Dion was poorly briefed -- one diplomat later characterized his performance as "deeply unimpressive" -- and clearly not in a true listening mode about the value of the CF role in Kandahar or about the need for NATO solidarity. Like many others in the Liberal Party, he seems to have made up his mind and will not be swayed by the Manley Panel. However, as an unpopular leader nationally and heading up a still deeply divided Liberal Party, the party ranks may not hold on this issue and he could end up having to accept a free vote on the next extension or, more likely, compromise language that could allow both parties to claim victory and permit the CF to extend their mission possibly only one or more ideally two more years. Alternatively, this could be the issue that leads to a confidence vote bringing down the government in the next several months -- without either the Conservatives or the Liberals yet having solid grounds for hope that they could win a solid enough majority to make the CF extension vote a sure thing even in a new Parliament. PM Harper and his strategists have some tricky tightrope walking ahead as they decide when and under what terms to bring this issue to a vote (while also facing the prospect of losing a confidence vote in the meantime on an unrelated issue, such as the budget). Any good news they can share about additional burden-sharing within NATO and enhanced materiel capabilities could strengthen their prospects considerably.

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